

# CHANGING COURSE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

*A commentary on U.S. policy in the region  
by Josh Cohen.*



**E**arlier this year, PACCA—Policy Alternatives for the Caribbean and Central America—published a report entitled “Changing Course: Blueprint for Peace in Central America and the Caribbean.” There are two broad concerns that frame the background of “Changing Course.”

First, like many other Americans—both North Americans and Central Americans—we are firmly opposed to current U.S. policy in Central America. We believe that that policy is immoral and that it is moving on a trajectory leading to further escalation and invasion—a trajectory with increasingly disastrous human consequences. In an admittedly conservative accounting of costs, one group of analysts recently estimated that an invasion of Nicaragua, together with continued economic and military support for other countries in the region, would cost \$16 billion over the 1984-1989 period, would result in 2,000-5,000 Americans killed, 9,000-19,000 wounded, and would require U.S. occupational forces of one-and-one-half divisions to remain in Nicaragua for at least 5 years. About Nicaraguans, the analysis says only that their casualties “are likely to be very much higher.”

Our second concern is that only one obstacle stands in the way of a continuation of U.S. policies and their escalation, and that is American public opinion. Two aspects of this merit attention. First, the bad news. We are trying to engage in and encourage others to engage in a *preventive action*, to stop the escalation before it goes any further. And we recognize that there are considerable difficulties in mobilizing large numbers of people under such circumstances. The good news is that we are certainly far better off in this respect than we were in the early 1960s. In 1962, when 13,000 American troops were in Vietnam, there was no anti-war movement of significant size and power. Now, by contrast, there is a movement, there is broad public scepticism, and—whatever its shortcomings—Congress is trying to exercise some independent initiative in the area of foreign policy.

The question that we face, then, is: can we consolidate this concern, this scepticism, this opposition, and effectively redirect U.S. policy toward Central America before more damage is done? I think that the answer to this question is: yes, but that doing so will require more than just criticism of current policies. As

in other policy areas, we need an *alternative* that states what we think is *right*, and not just criticisms of what we know is wrong. "Changing Course" presents such an alternative. It offers an analysis of the problems that beset Central America, and makes specific policy recommendations in the framework of a set of basic principles that ought to guide U.S. foreign policy everywhere.

First, then, let's consider the analysis. There are, I believe, two basic approaches to understanding Central America. Neither is correct in every respect—they are too oversimplified to be exactly right—but one is basically right, and the other is basically wrong. Each can be summarized straightforwardly.

First, there is the approach underlying Reagan administration policy. Its most clear statement can be found in Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick's 1979 article in *Commentary* magazine, "Dictatorships and Double Standards"—the article that won her the post of U.N. ambassador:

"Because the miseries of traditional life are familiar, they are bearable to ordinary people who, growing up in the society, learn to cope. . . ." In view of this willingness of those inside "traditional" societies to tolerate unlimited pain, suffering, and humiliation, it follows, as the night follows the day, that conflict and revolution must come from outside these societies, from "external" forces.

Finally, what is required to handle conflict is to eliminate the external threat, thus restoring order. A model of restoration is provided by El Salvador, 1932, when 30,000 Salvadoreans were killed, and about which Ambassador Kirkpatrick said: "To many Salvadoreans the violence of this repression seems less important than that of the fact of restored order and the thirteen years of civil peace that ensued."

That's one view of the problem. PACCA's view is very different. PACCA agrees with Ambler Moss, U.S. ambassador to Panama in 1980, who said that: "What we see in Central America today would not be much different if Castro and the Soviet Union did not exist." And with the Latin American bishops who said at Medellin in 1968: "Latin America faces a situation of injustice that can be called institutional violence. We should not be surprised, therefore, that the 'temptation to violence' is surfacing in Latin America. One should not abuse the patience of the people."

More specifically, PACCA's position

is that:

For most Central Americans, life is miserable and unfair, or, as Thomas Hobbes said, "nasty, mean, poor, brutish, and short." According to a United Nations study of 1981, nearly half the population lives in "extreme poverty." The distribution of income is grossly unequal: the richest 5 percent of the population take nearly one third of national income. In Nicaragua before the 1979 revolution, the bottom 50 percent of the population had an average per capita income of \$286 per year; one in eight infants died before they were one year old; and 80 percent of the rural population lacked sufficient land to produce their own means of subsistence.

Like citizens of Poland, Chile, or the United States, Central Americans will try to change miserable and unfair conditions. In short, PACCA rejects the central premise of the Kirkpatrick position—that people in "traditional societies are willing to tolerate unlimited insults to their human dignity."

While considerable economic growth took place in Central America between 1950 and 1978—an average annual increase in real GNP of 5.3 percent—this growth did little to improve the miserable

and unfair conditions. The reason lies in the basic model of growth: the production of agricultural goods (bananas, cotton, coffee, sugar, etc.) for export, and not for internal consumption.

The political system and the military are largely concerned to protect the privileged beneficiaries of the agro-export model. The result is that there are no real avenues of reform open to the people when, as in the early 1970s, they do act to change their miserable and unfair conditions. Rather, reform efforts typically lead to repression, and further efforts lead to terror. This combination of miserable and unfair conditions, a model of growth that fails to ameliorate these conditions, and a political order closed to reform makes the countries "ripe for revolution."

Finally, there is the role of the U.S. Some U.S. interests are the beneficiaries of these systems of exploitation. In any case the American government has consistently provided the ultimate guarantees for regimes of institutional violence through a variety of programs, ranging from covert action, to direct military intervention, to the steady provision of support and training for the military—e.g. the 5700 members of



Somoza's National Guard trained by the U.S. between 1950 and 1980. Indeed, the Rockefeller Report of 1969 stated that U.S. support for Latin American police and military forces "will bring the best long-term hope for the improvement of the quality of life of the people." Of course, lip service has always been paid to the importance of reform—from the Alliance for Progress, to the Kissinger Commission Report, to the speeches of President Reagan. But the rhetoric of reform has always disguised a reality of repression.

I have briefly summarized the PACCA analysis. What does this analysis suggest about what U.S. policy in Central America should be? First of all, PACCA holds that any policies should embrace the following general principles: (1) peaceful dispute resolution; (2) self-determination and non-intervention; (3) equitable development; (4) support for human rights; (5) encouragement of democratic values; (6) consistency with the *genuine* security interests of the citizens of the United States.

But in stating these principles, we must be careful to avoid excessive rhetoric. The central issue is not the statement of principles, but how they are interpreted in light of the analysis of Central America, and how they are embodied in policies. The Kissinger Commission report, for example, agrees with all of these principles. But its emphasis on "security interests" ensures the continuation of a policy of subordinating equitable development and reform to military support for existing regimes that have shown no interest in reform. PACCA's recommendations reflect its analysis of the internal sources of conflict and revolution. They emphasize equitable development—the needs of those at the bottom—and the legitimacy of diverse, alternative paths of national development.

To be more specific, our short term recommendations are:

1. In El Salvador, the Kissinger Commission recommends more military aid and no power sharing. PACCA recommends no military aid for the current regime, and calls for power sharing.

2. In Nicaragua, the Kissinger Commission calls for continued covert action, continued support for the contras, and continued credit pressures through multilateral lending agencies. PACCA calls for an end to covert action, an end to support for the contras, and an end to the credit blockade.

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3. In Honduras, the Kissinger Commission supports the U.S. military buildup; PACCA opposes it.

4. In Guatemala, the Kissinger Commission calls for military assistance; PACCA says no military assistance.

Thus PACCA agrees with a senior leader of the Salvadoran Christian Democrats, who complained that the Kissinger Commission "places too much emphasis on the military aspect."

What about the longer term? Here I will briefly review a few of the main PACCA Proposals for U.S. assistance for independent, national equitable development:

1. *Debt*: PACCA calls for a program of renegotiation of debt from shorter term to longer term, and from high interest loans to low interest loans. And, it calls for a change in IMF policies on conditionality, policies which now effectively condition the availability of credit of austerity programs for the poor.

2. *Trade*: Here there are two broad recommendations. First, that special duty-free treatment be given to imports from those countries in the region—for example, Nicaragua—that are overcoming gross inequality and promoting food production, rather than just more agro-exports. Second, that a program of price stabilization be instituted for basic agricultural exports, thus reducing dependency on world market fluctuations.

3. *Aid*: PACCA recommends that aid be provided to governments that are respon-

sive—in their policies, not just in their rhetoric—to the demands of the poor, that encourage—in deed, and not just in words—participation by the poor in defining the terms of the development process, and that encourage—in fact, not just in theory—diversification of the economic base.

Changing Course" provides an outlook on Central America that is *broad and regional* in scope, *long term* in perspective, and *reasonable and realistic* in its recommendations. Above all, PACCA's proposals represent a *positive vision* and a *real choice* for U.S. policy in the region. The proposals are practical, and they are principled. They reflect a sound understanding, and a clear sense of justice. Their heart is best captured in remarks made by the Columbian novelist—author of *100 Years of Solitude*—Gabriel Garcia Marquez. In accepting his Nobel Prize for Literature, Garcia Marquez returned to the theme of Latin American solitude:

The immeasurable violence and pain of our history are the result of age-old inequities and untold bitterness, and not a conspiracy plotted 3,000 leagues from our homes. But many European leaders and thinkers have thought so, with the childishness of old-timers who have forgotten the fruitful excesses of their youth as if it were impossible to find another destiny than to live at the mercy of the two great masters of the world. This, my friends, is the very scale of our solitude.

He continued by expressing his belief in a utopia:

A new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will prove true and happiness be possible, and where the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth.

By moving forward on the basis of the alternative course PACCA has proposed, we can begin to overcome our own one hundred years of solitude from the people of Central America. ■

*This commentary is drawn from testimony which Josh Cohen, an associate professor of philosophy and political science at MIT, presented before the Massachusetts State Democratic Committee's Commission on Central America.*